

Bush Turns Back Baltic-Americans' Lithuania Appeal

By Ann Devroy
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President Bush, arguing that the United States must avoid steps that could inflame the situation, turned back appeals from Baltic-American groups yesterday that he provide stronger backing to Lithuania and other Baltic states seeking to break away from the Soviet Union.

In a meeting with a dozen representatives of Lithuanian-, Estonian- and Latvian-Americans, Bush was asked to move toward "de facto" recognition of the Lithuanian government of President Vytautas Landsbergis. Such a policy, involving meetings with representatives of the Landsbergis government and other steps, would be an interim move toward official recognition.

But White House press secretary Marlin Fitzwater said after the session, "Our policy, we believe, is the correct one, and it does not involve recognition." Fitzwater said the president repeated his support for self-determination in the Baltic states but told the representatives: "The U.S. must avoid taking actions that would inadvertently make Lithuania's task more difficult by inflaming the situation."

The group had been seeking a meeting with Bush since January, one of its leaders said. During the meeting, the ethnic representatives presented Bush with a letter calling on him to recognize Lithuanian independence regardless of the "greater geopolitical concerns you must face in your dealings with the Soviet Union."

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The president meets with members of Baltic-American delegation. Juhan Simonson is at left, Valdis Pavlovskis at right.

Bush Rejects Recognition Of Lithuania

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In addition, the group asked Bush to oppose any call for referendums in the Baltic states as a condition for independence from the Soviet Union. Secretary of State James A. Baker III last week endorsed such a referendum in Lithuania, an approach the Soviet Union is pushing.

The group also said the Soviets should not be granted any economic or trade concessions, such as most-favored nation status, until they negotiate "in good faith" with Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. The United States has been working on improved trade relations with the Soviets and hopes to announce some steps during the U.S.-Soviet summit at the end of next month.

State Department spokesman Margaret Tutwiler, asked yesterday if the United States is prepared to deny the trade concessions to Soviets unless there is improvement in the Lithuanian situation, said Baker had not imposed specific conditions when he met with the Soviets on the



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President Bush gestures before meeting with Juhan Simonson, left, president of the Estonian-American National Committee, and other Baltic-American leaders.

issue. Other U.S. officials said such trade moves were possibilities for leverage against the Soviets.

Anthony Mazeika of the Baltic American Freedom League, while praising Bush for listening to the group's appeals, said, "We are disappointed with the official policy of the United States" of not recognizing Lithuania, either directly or indirectly, as the group has proposed.

He said Bush told the group he has to consider other "agendas" as well as his desire to support "Gorbachev's overall efforts for democratic reform."

Mazeika said that when the Landsbergis government declared

independence last month, "Gorbachev was waiting to hear a response" from Bush and what he got was a "vacuum."

Ojars Kalnins of the American Latvian Association said Bush was warned that the tensions in Lithuania can be expected to move to Estonia and Latvia in the weeks ahead. "The problems that are taking place are going to multiply threefold," he said, as the Latvians prepare to declare their independence in two weeks and Estonia moves along on the same process. "By the time we get to the summit, we will have a situation in all three" Baltic states, he said.